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Representations of femininity and masculinity in advertising practices

Lorna Stevens and Jacob Ostberg

Overview

This chapter introduces the topic of representations of femininity and masculinity in advertising practices. We will show the differences between a common, taken-for-granted understanding of gendered representations in advertising and a cultural perspective, which takes the culturally and socially constructed nature of gender into consideration. We will also demonstrate how marketing managers can adopt a *traditional* approach or a *cultural* approach to their advertising strategies in relation to gender. They may also adopt a *complacent* strategy or a *subversive* strategy. There are therefore four choices available to marketing managers in terms of their advertising strategies. These are *traditional/complacent*, *traditional/subversive*, *cultural/complacent* or *cultural/subversive*. We illustrate these positions with examples from contemporary advertising campaigns. The key implication is that the discussion invites present and future marketing managers to take a more macro and reflective view of gendered representations. By sensitizing managers to wider macro issues, we argue that they can make a more informed choice about whether to sustain the status quo of conventional gendered representations (the *complacent* strategy) or whether to aspire to taking a vanguard position by challenging traditional representations and thereby offering something new instead (the *subversive* strategy).

Introduction

The specific marketing issue to be discussed in this chapter is representations of gendered images in advertising. As consumers, we are bombarded by thousands of commercial messages every day. There is simply no way to avoid being exposed to advertising, and even if we do not necessarily buy the items that are advertised, advertising serves a number of other important functions, which we may not always be consciously aware of. One of the more important functions of advertising is that it provides us with a blueprint of how to live 'the good life'. Among other things, it provides us with images of how 'real' women and 'real' men should be. Often advertisements present us with repeated exposure to representations of men and women which are stereotypical, and these stereotypes give us an implicit assumption of how men and women really are. In particular, we would argue that the different and often opposite ways that men and women are represented might, over time, appear natural and self-evident. While we might be able to critically reflect on an individual advertisement, analyze it, and discuss its implicit values and unrealistic portrayals, the sheer mass of commercial messages has a way of breaking through the barriers of even the most critically conscious consumers. Consequently, advertising portrayals of gender insinuate

their way into our collective cultural consciousness, even our individual psyches, normalizing certain traits associated with 'masculinity' and 'femininity', 'men' and 'women', and impacting upon how we frame and define gender and sexual difference in contemporary consumer culture.

Advertisements may reflect, sustain, challenge or even subvert the predominant cultural values of a society. They are myth carriers in our culture, and they may draw on symbolic codes and metaphors to serve up ancient narratives, but often in new and exciting ways. They hold up a mirror to society, reflecting the beliefs and values of it, or they challenge and subvert the norms of society, in order to catch the attention of an intended market. Cultural values are conveyed in advertisements through the language and imagery used in them, and such texts communicate with us at a profound, emotional level, drawing on deep-rooted cultural meanings that are embedded in our shared cultural consciousness and experiences, namely the myths, taboos, rituals and customs that surround us (cf. Chapter 5 in this volume).

Since advertising serves these important social and cultural functions, marketing professionals can benefit from developing a greater awareness of the significance of these more macro dimensions in the marketplace, and how they reflect and indeed impact on both advertising and the consumer behaviour they seek to reflect and influence. Above all, the chapter therefore seeks to explore the dynamics of gender portrayals in contemporary advertising. Insights into the historical, social and cultural constructions of gender in Western culture can be used in order to either uphold the status quo by employing traditional gender stereotypes in advertising campaigns, if one believes this to be the best way to appeal to a target market. We will call this the *complacent* strategy. Both *traditional (laissez-faire)* and *cultural (playful)* approaches in advertising may employ this complacent strategy. Alternatively, managers might use the power vested in the advertising industry to create a more nuanced and complex view of masculinities and femininities, by either adopting a *traditional* approach (critiquing institutions) or a *cultural* approach (destabilizing ideologies), in order to better reflect the realities of gender in the contemporary marketplace, or even to strive to change perceptions and make us think about what we take for granted in our marketing practices. We refer to this as the *subversive* strategy. We illustrate these two axes in Figure 24.1.

In traditional marketing, consumer culture exists 'out there' and is more or less seen as a pre-existing structure in which the company finds itself operating. At each point in time, and in each location, it is up to the marketing department to conjure up an attractive marketing offer suited to a particular target market. Most marketing management textbooks stress the importance of marketing research and robust marketing information systems (see, for example, any edition of Philip Kotler's *Principles of Marketing* texts). Successful marketing management is thus said to be contingent upon a sophisticated understanding of what happens in the company's micro and macro environment. While we do not deny that this type of knowledge is important, we want to challenge the sharp distinction made between the company and the rest of the world. We particularly want to challenge the assumption that consumer culture exists independently of individual companies. One reason for drawing attention to this is that such a view does not place any responsibility on companies for shaping consumer culture (cf. Chapter 28 in this volume). More specifically, it does not place any responsibility on companies in terms of how stereotypical depictions of gender in advertising may serve to reinforce traditional views of what constitutes *real* men and women.

Instead, we want to introduce a cultural approach to consumer culture and advertising. Such a view recognizes that companies are engaged in actively *co-producing* consumer

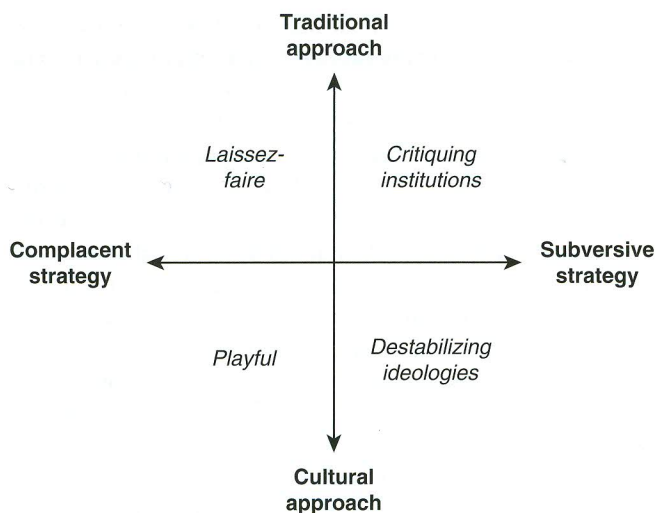


Figure 24.1 Differences between the traditional and the cultural approach.

Table 24.1 Managerial contribution of the cultural approach

	<i>Traditional marketing approach</i>	<i>Cultural marketing approach</i>
Consumer culture	"Pre-existing" as an entity separate from companies	Companies and consumer culture exist in a co-constitutive relationship
Role of marketers	Marketing activities do not play a significant role in shaping consumer culture	Marketing activities are co-responsible for creating consumer culture
Responsibility of marketers	None – they merely react to marketing conditions	Considerable – portrayals of idealized gender stereotypes in advertising impinges on consumer culture

culture and the norms and values associated with it. A cultural approach to advertising thus places much more weight, and hence responsibility, on marketing managers' capacity to shape consumer culture. Rather than viewing consumer culture as existing 'out there' as a separate entity, a cultural approach recognizes that company activities, such as advertising, play a part in shaping consumer culture (Table 24.1). What we hope to offer are new approaches for understanding advertising, and especially to critically looking at portrayals of men and women. It should be noted, however, that this sort of critical inquiry into how we portray certain groups of people in advertising could equally be applied to other 'variables' such as age and ethnicity (cf. Chapter 18 in this volume).

Why should a company care about these issues, one might ask? Will it lead to higher revenue in the short run, or even in the long run? Quite possibly, in fitting in with or challenging social constructions of gender. However, our argument situates advertising strategy within the burgeoning management phenomenon of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) whereby businesses are conducted along socially and ethically responsible lines (cf. Chapter 28 in this volume). One could argue that CSR is the deliberate inclusion of public interest into corporate decision-making, and indeed the societal marketing concept

draws attention to citizens rather than consumers. Most of the time when such public interest is referred to, it has to do with ethics, environmental issues, and labour rights, but we would like to add gender to this agenda. Companies aspiring to contribute not only to their own short-term profits and customer satisfaction but also to long-term profits and public interest and welfare, should, we argue, behave responsibly in terms of how men and women are portrayed in their marketing campaigns, as this is not only an important strategic decision but an important ethical decision.

Marketing managers are thus faced with choices in relation to how they portray gender in their advertising campaigns. They can either sustain gender stereotypes or offer more pluralistic ways of looking at gender. In doing the latter they resist serving up the same old formulaic stereotypes of men and women. These choices acknowledge the profound influence of advertising and how it can reinforce cultural values and, by extension, consumers' values in the marketplace.

Theoretical discussion: gender studies and marketing

We now move on to discuss how stereotypical portrayals of men and women in advertising are based on deep-seated gender dichotomies in culture, such as culture/nature, man/woman, mind/body and so forth, as depicted in Table 24.2. In marketing, a gender dichotomy lies at the heart of its theories and practices. We can illustrate this by offering a brief account of the evolution of marketing as a discipline. The marketing concept places consumers at the centre of the organization, and the traditionally accepted view of consumers in marketing theory was that they were rational and logical human beings, with clear needs that could be met by effective, consumer needs-focused marketing. This focus was very much a micro-managerial one, with an emphasis on identifying consumers' social, psychological and demographic characteristics, and then meeting their needs better than competitors.

It is perhaps curious that early marketing theorists took the view that consumer behaviour and consumer buyer decision-making revolved around a mental process of problem recognition, information searching, evaluation of alternatives and the purchase decision. After all, the word 'consumer' usually describes a physical, bodily act. Joy and Venkatesh (1994) write that this led to the act of consumption being envisaged as a 'disembodied phenomenon'. The wider, cultural context for this emphasis was that the mind was privileged in

Table 24.2 Cultural associations with femininity and masculinity

<i>Concepts associated with femininity</i>	<i>Concepts associated with masculinity</i>
Nature	Culture
Body	Mind
Instinct	Logic
Passion	Reason
Carnality	Spirituality
Impulse	Control
Consumer	Producer
Emotion	Discipline
Irrationality	Rationality

Western culture. This so-called *privileging* of the mind had its basis in a modernist value system focused on a perception of man as a rational being, and it led to models of consumer buying behaviour that viewed consumers and the purchase decision-making process as predictable, rational and sequential.

This managerial, modernist focus neglected wider, macro environmental forces, such as cultural, social and political influences. Change was afoot, however. In the 1980s, new theories of consumer behaviour infiltrated the field, originating in other disciplines such as anthropology, the humanities and sociology. These brought with them new perspectives on consumers. Consumers were no longer simply viewed as potential customers of products and services that would satisfy clearly defined needs and solve specific problems. Consumer behaviour was beginning to be understood as being located in a much wider, macro context, and it was acknowledged that it was important to consider issues of cultural, social, personal and gender identity.

Marketers now had a choice: they could rely on models of consumer behaviour that focused on mental processes such as cognition, rationality and logic, or they could consider new concepts of consumer behaviour that focused on the emotions, senses and impulses. Certainly, it is true to say that consumers were increasingly recognized as being driven as much by their senses as by reason, as much by their passions as by logic. Irrespective of which perspective marketers took, experiential and hedonic aspects of consumption had now come to the fore, and the consumer was unlikely to ever again be conceived of as a disembodied problem identifier and solver! (See Holbrook and Hirschman's work (1982) for a full discussion of this paradigmatic shift in consumer behaviour research.)

In this more 'animistic' world the human *body* inevitably took centre stage, and the focus on the body had important implications for how men and women were depicted in advertising. Traditionally men were rational customers who ultimately purchased products and services, and women were the emotional consumers who were targeted by advertisers. This gendered division reflected distinct and different gendered roles and responsibilities in Western society, and furthermore these differences had a long history. In general terms, 'masculinity' was associated with the mind, logic and rationality. Men were traditionally regarded as being 'naturally' more rational than women, and thus they had the ability to transcend their bodily urges; women, however, were not perceived as being able to do this, and were envisaged as being at the mercy of their bodily wants and desires (Joy and Venkatesh 1994).

Women have been associated with nature, carnality, instinct and passion since ancient times, whereas men have been associated with culture, reason, control and spirituality. The feminine thus came to define emotionality, irrationality and sensuality (Bordo 1993). Furthermore, womanhood had a dangerous, appetitive and volatile nature, in contrast to manhood, which was disciplined, rational and controlled. Unlike men, women were therefore at the mercies of their mortal bodies, subject to the body's frailties and vagaries, forever buffeted by their feminine natures.

The traditional privileging of the mind over the body was gradually being challenged, however. The so-called 'turn to the body' is usually associated with postmodernism. Postmodernism is attributed with changing the focus of the consumer as a rational, knowing subject to a communicative subject indulging in subjective experiences. The postmodern consumer is characterized as having a playful attitude to the marketplace, enjoying the games, simulations and fun associated with being a 'fragmented' consumer, leading a 'multi-layered existence' in a liberating and limitless space, where freedom and choice are both expected and demanded (see Brown 1995, for a full discussion of postmodernism

and marketing). The postmodernist perspective takes a somewhat ironic view of the meaning and value of things, questioning all that is taken for granted and respecting very little.

Postmodernism gives the body centre stage, and significantly, this body is no longer a female body. The triad of male/producer/mind versus female/consumer/body has now broken down and become fragmented, and the old dichotomy of the marketplace has also been challenged; some might say turned upside down. Postmodernism has paved the way for new conceptualizations, representations and visual spectacles of both men and women in the marketplace, and the marketplace now provides a stage for all kinds of representations of men and women, which shake up traditional ideas about the 'masculine' and the 'feminine', about 'men' and 'women', about 'sexual objects' and 'sexual subjects', about the mind and the body in consumption, and about gender roles in consumer culture. Gender blending and gender bending have thus been thrown into the marketing communication mix alongside traditional gender stereotyping and gender categories, and this has had surprising, challenging, provocative and at times, shocking results.

Aside from the influence of postmodernism, feminist research on the body has also been influential in drawing attention to so-called embodiment issues in the marketplace, challenging how women are portrayed in the media, by focusing on women's experiences with their bodies in terms of beauty practices, fashion, fitness regimes, eating disorders and cosmetic surgery. This research shows how bodies are continually moulded and shaped by societal, cultural and political forces, in order that individuals can achieve normalization in terms of physical appearance. (See Davis 1997 for a full discussion of this.) However, while feminism shares postmodernism's aims of drawing attention to the body in the marketplace, it is also true that feminism or 'feminisms', as they now tend to be called, have an uneasy alliance with postmodernism, as postmodern advertising often resurrects old stereotypes of women and men in order to engage in playful, irreverent depictions that mock so-called political correctness.

In the previous section we highlighted how the values associated with femininity and masculinity emerged in Western culture, briefly outlining the role of history, culture, marketing, postmodernism and feminism on how feminine and masculine values were mapped onto men and women in social and cultural practices, including advertising. We have suggested that a *cultural* approach and a *traditional* approach to advertising are at opposite ends of a continuum. We have also suggested that there is another intersecting axis, with a *complacent* strategy and a *subversive* strategy as the endpoints. In other words, marketing managers can choose to adopt one of four positions: a traditional/complacent, traditional/subversive, cultural/complacent or cultural/subversive position (see Figure 24.1). Furthermore, we will argue that there is a distinct lack of subversive perspectives in marketing communication strategies. In both traditional and cultural approaches the dominance of the postmodern paradigm leads to either a *laissez-faire* attitude on the one hand, or a *playful* attitude on the other.

Femininity and masculinity in advertising

We now offer examples of how contemporary advertising deals with female and male bodies and their representation. The carnal feminine offers an analysis of several advertising campaigns that show a return to the ancient narrative of what we describe as 'the carnal feminine', namely the age-old notion that women are irrational bodies who are prey to their carnal appetites. Sometimes these ads employ postmodern irony when they represent women

in stereotypical ways and at other times they assume a more conventional, taken-for-granted tone. The second part explores how the representation of men and masculinity in contemporary advertising campaigns are challenging, yet upholding, conventional norms. Sexual objectification is no longer the preserve of women, it seems, but is becoming increasingly prevalent in advertisements targeting men, specifically in relation to traditional taboos about male sexuality.

The 'carnal feminine'

The main narrative used in advertising depicts women as 'consummate consumers' who are ruled by their bodily appetites and are unable to resist the lure of carnal pleasures. The word carnal is from the Latin *carnalis*, from *carne* meaning 'flesh'. The definition of 'carnal' is 'of the body or flesh; worldly'. Its secondary meaning is also noteworthy: 'worldly, sensual, sexual'. Most contemporary advertisements targeting women thus adopt what we would define as the *complacent* strategy. In other words, they either adopt a traditional/complacent, *laissez-faire* attitude in terms of gender portrayals, or a cultural/complacent one, employing a postmodern *playfulness* in relation to gender stereotypes. The traditional/complacent *laissez-faire* position is exemplified by advertisements targeting women that emphasize women's animal natures, specifically their carnal appetites. This usually results in advertisements that employ sexually suggestive and erotic narratives which emphasize experiential consumption and sensory pleasures. The narrative is particularly overt in the advertising of products (of which there are many) that are depicted as being endowed with the power to enable women to experience intense physical pleasure from their consumption. Examples of product categories that are depicted as objects of desire for women include food products such as chocolate, ice cream and cream cheese; luxury biscuits; and toiletries and cosmetics, such as shampoo, bath and shower products, and perfume.

Food product advertisements targeting women are usually framed within a carnal (and often erotic) narrative, because these narratives are based on the assumption that eating is women's secret pleasure and secret sin. The association of women's consumption of food and toiletries with their sexual appetites provides advertisers with opportunities to playfully explore 'naughty but nice' narratives. There is also a dark side to this, however, in that giving into the lure of one's appetites can lead to excessive consumption, and this may have undesirable outcomes in our culture, notably in the form of weight gain in the case of high-fat foods such as chocolate. The notion that women's 'animal' appetites are always in danger of spiralling out of control draws on long-standing cultural codes, as we have argued.

Bordo (1993) writes that in Western culture women's appetite for food and women's appetite for sex are often represented as being one and the same thing. There are a number of excellent examples of the conflation of eating and sexual suggestiveness in advertisements targeting women, and its inherent Freudian symbolism is often used to full effect in contemporary advertisements. One of the most famous examples is the 1991 Cadbury's flake ad which features a woman eating a Cadbury's Flake in an over-flowing bubble bath (Figure 24.2). Such ads draw clear parallels between food consumption and sexual surrender. This ad is still considered to be one of the all-time most sexy ads, according to a poll conducted in 2008.

In their study of women's chocolate consumption, Belk and Costa (1998) write that the consumption of luxury foods is gendered as female. They also refer to the 'emotionally charged' environment within which women consume chocolate (ibid.: 189), and they

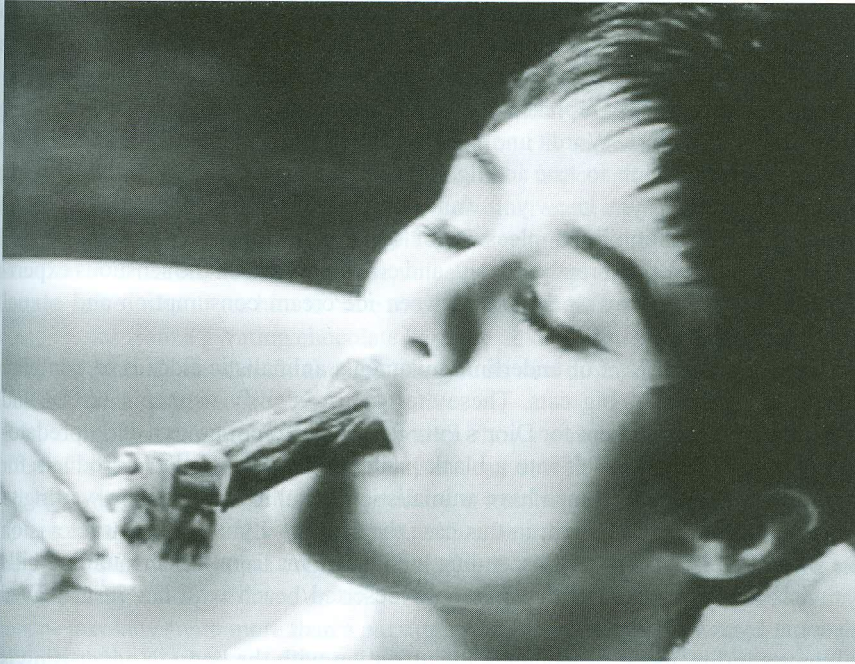


Figure 24.2 Advertisement for Cadbury's Flake.

Source: Credit: Image Courtesy of the Advertising Archives.

highlight the ambivalence that surrounds women's consumption of such products. Advertisements for chocolate address this ambivalence in their seductive and often tongue-in-cheek narratives about women succumbing to the temptation of eating pleasurable, high calorie, and often luxury food products. In another study, Lupton writes that chocolate signifies 'romance, luxury, decadence, indulgence, reward, sensuousness and femininity' (1996: 35). Chocolate advertisements, reflecting a traditional cultural norm, thus tell us that such animal wants are 'natural' in women and cannot be denied. This being the case, they are thus compelled to offer women a never-ending array of sensually, erotically and emotionally charged advertising narratives, narratives that also point to the bittersweet ambivalence that lies at the centre of such seductive appeals.

Ice cream is another popular product category for depicting the auto-erotic potential of food consumption for advertisers. One recent ad for Wall's Cornetto range of luxury ice creams features an attractive young woman on a balcony slowly consuming her ice cream with a spoon while watching a handsome artist at work in the room opposite. The artist is aware that he is being watched and becomes increasingly distracted from his work and aroused by this spectacle. This is suggested by some auto-erotic body stroking on his part and a noticeable increase in perspiration! Finally, he can bear it no longer and he rushes from the room, presumably in the direction of her apartment, judging by her knowing smile towards the door at the end of the advertisement. Wall's have also recently launched a humorous TV ad campaign for a new range of luxury ice creams in their Cornetto range called 'Love Potion'. The strapline is 'Love at first bite – steer clear of them', and the ad shows the wild, uncontrollable passions that can be unleashed in women by their consumption. HB's Magnum range of luxury ice creams called '7 Deadly Sins', shows a woman who

is tempted by Magnum (the devil) who introduces her to her 'sinful selves' and she then embarks on her 'journey...so many sins, so little time'. The television advertising campaign features an ad for each of the seven options available in the range and shows the same woman in seven different guises to represent each of the seven sins: revenge, gluttony, sloth, greed, jealousy, vanity and lust. Words and phrases used include: 'give in', 'let go', 'let gluttony consume you, succumb to true indulgence', 'indulge in the joy of sloth', 'fulfil your heart's deepest desires', 'you know you want to', 'tantalise yourself', 'slide the wrapper off', 'indulge in the uninhibited pleasure of ice cream', 'enjoy the sensation of decadence', and finally, 'lie back, breathe deeply, and continue to relish the sensuous experience'. The campaign clearly draws parallels between ice cream consumption and sexual surrender.

One of the most common ways of underlining women's animalistic sides is to compare them with animals, particularly big cats. These are used to signify women's lustful and dangerous aspects. An advertisement for Dior's Pure Poison perfume shows a dark, predatory temptress who transforms herself into a black panther, and Lynx toiletry products for young men play on the idea that women have animalistic, lustful natures that are waiting to be unleashed with the right stimulation, in this case the scent of Lynx. A recent television advert shows wild, bikini-clad women descending in their droves from the surrounding hills in order to ravish (we assume) a young man on a deserted beach who has just sprayed himself with some Lynx body spray.

Another important dimension of women's identification with the body in advertising is apparent in ads that show women as a larger than life force of nature that is out of control, and loving it! Such representations of women in advertisements have a humorous and playful tone, as they typically show real, believable women having fun and happily succumbing to their animal appetites. Perhaps the best known example of this theme is the long-standing Terry's Chocolate Orange campaign in the UK. This campaign memorably casts the generously proportioned English comedienne and actress Dawn French as the insatiable chocoholic who can't control her consumption of Terry's Chocolate Orange, and nor does she want to! Above all, she wants to keep the pleasure of eating chocolate to herself: 'It's not Terry's! It's mine!' We are also led to assume that she is supremely indifferent to the bodily consequences of such indulgence, and indeed Dawn French takes a celebratory approach to being a larger woman generally, not least by developing a range of clothing for women with larger than average body shapes. She is a role model in English culture for a woman of excess who delights in excess, whether it is her ribald and outrageous comedy routines or her role as the face of Terry's Chocolate Orange, and the Terry's Chocolate Orange campaign reflects her own flamboyant, comedic style. Dawn French embodies the garrulous, amply-proportioned big woman who is ruled by her appetites and makes no apology for this. In some respects this could be considered to be a difficult position to take in the current climate of concern over the rise in obesity levels in Western societies, and indeed Dawn French ceased to be the face of the campaign in 2007, amidst speculation that Terry's were responding to increasing social pressures in this regard.

Another common strategy in advertising is to deliberately employ 'porn codes' to draw parallels between food consumption and sexual intercourse with 'bad' women. These codes are commonly used when the target markets are men. The pornographic often denotes prostitution and sex for sale, and is rooted in the concept of domination over women. It also commodifies the human body and persistently stereotypes male and female sexual roles (Schroeder and McDonagh 2004). Probyn (2000) suggests that food narratives generally draw on the language of 'soft porn' and thereby equate food consumption with sex

consumption. In her study she cites the 'soft porn' antics of celebrity TV cooks in the UK, and she quotes Nigella Lawson's comments that all of us are 'gastropornographers'.

The Kinder Bueno range of chocolate bars provide an excellent exemplar of the pornographic in an advertising campaign, and this brand freely and unapologetically uses 'porn codes'. A recent TV advertising campaign in the UK memorably, and disturbingly, (given that the product range originally targeted children) uses such codes to personify the product as a female prostitute. It features a male customer entering a newsagents' shop in a dirty mac, furtively glancing at the top shelf of the magazine racks for something to buy. His attention is arrested, however, by the voice of a young, high-pitched Far Eastern accented female voice, who urges him to 'bite me, bite me, I'll be whatever you want me to be.' The voice comes from a gyrating chocolate bar. The ad draws on sado-masochistic porn codes to make the product memorable and appealing to its new target market, young adult males, and it clearly hints at sex tourism in its narrative.

In a similar vein, an ad for Pot Noodles shows a man rejecting his wholesome wife's offer of a home-made sandwich so that he can search for 'something dirty' in the local red light district. Having been slapped by a number of indignant ladies of the night by his requests, he eventually finds a 'tart with a heart' who takes him into a dark alley, and there he finds what he's been looking for, a Pot Noodle! More recently, a horse-riding and hunting analogy is used in this series of television ads, with references made to an upper-class lady (with more than a passing resemblance to Lady Chatterley from the notorious novel by DH Lawrence), and her lusty gamekeeper. The campaign currently uses a riding horn ('have you got the horn?') to suggest the product's association with sexual arousal and the sex act itself. A number of Pot Noodle ads have been banned. Their most notorious campaign used the strapline 'the slag of all snacks' to underline the positioning of their product.

This strategy can be perceived as another example of the cultural perception of woman as an insatiable consumer who lures men from the straight and narrow path. In this case she is also the product itself, a commodity that men cannot resist. She is consumed, and, even worse, she is a product that is bad for men's health! The consumption of food and the consumption of sex become one and the same, the common denominator being women, a body to be consumed.

Undesirable and desirable males

Due to changes in conventions of representation of the male body, it has been suggested that men today are being taught, or allowed, to gaze at other men either for pleasure or for anxiety-evoking contrast, and that this makes men increasingly aware of, and dissatisfied with, bodies that do not meet various cultural ideals. When we are faced with admirable bodies in visual representations, such as advertising, the subject being depicted is turned into an admired and admirable object. While female bodies can be portrayed in the nude without too many apologies, the nude, or partially nude, male body typically needs an excuse to be portrayed. The men depicted need to be engaged in some activity rather than just posing. In classical art, war scenes have been the most common excuse to portray eroticized male bodies in action (ripped clothing, bulging muscles, sweat) with neither the subject portrayed, nor the onlooker, having to feel uncomfortable. Today, especially in advertising, sports seem to be the excuse of choice, as there is apparently nothing peculiar about masses of half-naked, well-sculpted, sweaty bodies being seen either on sports courts, or in places connected to sports, such as locker rooms.

Representations of men in advertising have typically been connected to men's traditional role as breadwinners, and this legacy was unchallenged up to the 1970s. During the 1980s, however, this slowly changed, as men started appearing without references to family – shown alone and in close-up. Still, men were typically portrayed as dominant and as actionable, in charge, as if they were creating a sense of identity by extending out from their body to control objects and others. In his classic study of gender in advertisements, Ervin Goffman (1979) found that women are typically represented as cradling or caressing an object but not grasping, holding or manipulating it in a utilitarian way. All in all, it seems that men are active with clear purpose, whereas women just look on admiringly. During the 1990s, men's role as homemakers/breadwinners was further de-emphasized, and contempt for stereotypically unpleasant male behaviours – such as uncleanness and poor household skills – became a staple of advertising. This open ridicule of masculinity slowly paved the way for an increased erotization of the male body in advertising. In the 1990s men were increasingly portrayed to-be-looked-at, without the protective shelter of humour, degradation or ridicule. Nick Kamen's classic ad for Levi's 501, where he undresses in a 1950s launderette, aired for the first time in 1985, and marks a shift in representations of men in TV ads. About ten years later Calvin Klein took a new turn and introduced a more overtly sexual representation of males in a series of underwear ads that has continued to this day.

While there have been changes in how masculinity is portrayed in advertising, there is still a dominance of fairly traditional modes of representations where men are active, in control and acting upon the world – the *laissez-faire* position in Figure 24.1. Advertisements of this type either address or portray men in a taken-for-granted manner, where stereotypes of how men are – not comfortable in taking care of babies, poor at expressing emotions, or naturally unskilled at household work – are sustained. There is an abundance of these types of advertisements available. There has, however, been an increase in the amount of advertising where men are portrayed in other, non-traditional ways thus occupying the three other positions in Figure 24.1. Most of the time, there is no real subversive potential, rather, we see a cultural/complacent strategy, where a postmodern playfulness in relation to gender stereotypes is employed, but there are tendencies towards change. Here we will look at how men are increasingly being reminded in advertising that they might not be living up to the beauty standards in society, the notion that they might indeed be undesirable is thus played upon. In particular, there is the suggestion that their self-worth is measured by how much attention they are getting from females. This is interesting, as the dominant masculine mode of being judged by what one *does* rather than by how one *looks* is thus challenged. We will also look at how men are shown as objects of sexual desire. Typically, this is described in terms of 'beefcake' ads in addition to the conventional 'cheesecake' ads used in advertising. In all these examples, we will see how men are portrayed as potential objects of desire, but how the ads, in more or less subtle ways, make sure that something more can be detected. It is not merely a picture of a beautiful man or a suggestion that men need certain products in order to be accepted. Instead, there is typically a rational consumption choice that can be made.

Recently, there has been an increase in ads where it is suggested that the purchase of a particular product will result in increased female attention to a man. This marks a shift, as insecurity is inserted in the representations of men. It is no longer self-evident, even in the fantasy world created by advertising, that a good man will find a good woman. Advertising to women has long used this strategy and there are plenty of ads where women are being offered various products or self-help procedures that will help them 'capture' a man. All of a sudden, it has become increasingly common to adopt such an approach in advertising for

men. Some of the most vivid examples of these types of advertisements can be seen in the penile enlargement industry, as discussed in detail by Ostberg (2010). There are, however, plenty of less extreme examples, taken from mainstream advertising, pointing towards similar tendencies.

Ever since the breakthrough advertising of Calvin Klein in the 1990s, men's bodies have frequently been shown in advertising as objects of desire. A recent example is the underwear brand Frigo Underwear (www.frigounderwear.se) that has one of their ads featuring a man lounging in a cane chair (Figure 24.3). He is wearing bright white underwear that stands in stark contrast to the grey shades of colour used in the rest of the picture. The man's crotch is in focus of the picture and the rest of the picture becomes increasingly unfocused as one's eyes move away from that area of his body. The man is leaning backwards in the chair, still his abdominal muscles appear tense and flexed, as if he was about to get up from the chair. This is contrasted by the top part of the body that seems exceptionally relaxed and at ease. The man's mouth and eyes are half-open, he is gazing lustily at something outside of the picture. Is he waiting for someone? You perhaps? A lover? Male or female?

These facial features, the half-open eyes and mouth, are a common visual convention in portraits of women as desirable objects. We thus see, in Figure 24.3, how visual conventions of how to portray women are transferred to the portrayal of men. This shows a cultural sensitivity on the behalf of the company; they know that this will not be read negatively by the target group. Eroticized images of men are not new to advertising, but this particular image shows a man that is not actionable, a man that is not engaged in sports, for example, which is the usual excuse for the exposure of partially nude male bodies.

Even though there are to-be-looked-at ads featuring men, this is often regarded as being too overt. There must typically be something more that excuses the presence of the scantily clad man. In the case of Frigo Underwear, the man on the picture is not just stretched out on the cane chair for our pleasure; he is indeed displaying a fantastic invention. The copy reads 'Frigo: A small step for man. A giant step for manhood.' Frigo Underwear is, apparently, the greatest invention in the underwear business since Jockey invented the Y-front in 1935. It is, according to Frigo Underwear's homepage 'more alluring than the wonderbra'. The very masculine traits of science, progression, invention and technology function as a

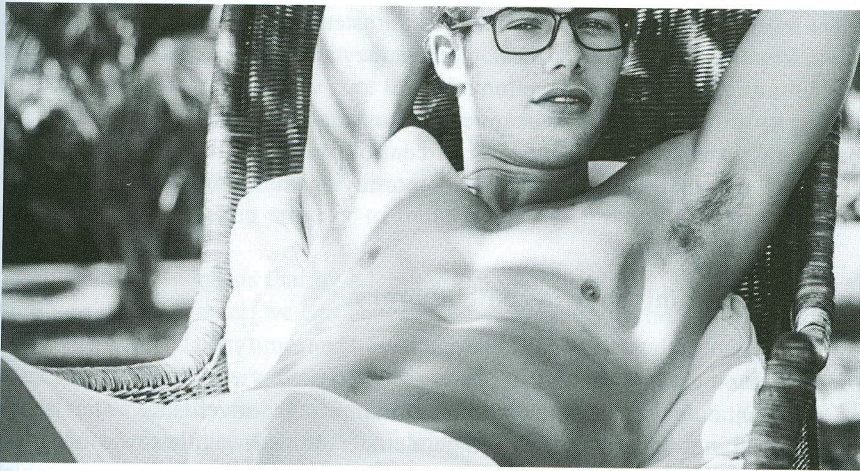


Figure 24.3 Advertisement for Frigo Underwear.

counterbalance to the picture of the lounging man. The tendency to offset the picture of the lounging man with a more goal-directed reasoning is also found in the statement of the company philosophy:

When God created man he wanted their genitals to hang loose. The genitals were supposed to stay cool in the gentle breeze, before, after and during the hunt for food. But then things begun to change ... And then what happened to their precious genitals? I guess you know. Sweat broke out, it rubbed and hung. But let us establish that we're living in a modern era and stay positive. The men who choose to wear Frigo today is also hunting. It's just the prey that is different.

First and foremost, we see here that the man as breadwinner ethos is restored; men are born, even created, to hunt for food. In today's environment when the hunting might be less eventful, the predatory instincts of men have been transferred to the hunt for a partner. The advertising for Frigo Underwear is playing with ideas of some eternal masculine traits. Still, despite the attempts to hide the invention of Frigo Underwear under the veil of 'restoring things to their natural state', the real benefit of the particular model is that it gives the wearer a more 'shapely package'. The inventor apparently '... equipped his underwear with a sawn pocket in which the whole package was placed which made it easy to ventilate and regulate the body temperature: All parts were kept in place and "voilà" he had invented the first "shape-up" for men.'

So, despite the attempts to cast the marketing of Frigo Underwear in a macho tone, the product is geared towards the insecurities of men. And not just any insecurity, but the most taboo of all insecurities: the insecurity of not being sufficiently well endowed. The advertisers thus utilize the classic technique dispersed in most mainstream branding or advertising textbooks: if you want consumers to act on your marketing offer, make them insecure in their relationships with others and offer your product as the solution.

Frigo continues to play with the conventions in the next ad where they move into slightly more subversive terrain by directly referencing the iconic advertising campaign for Wonderbra where Eva Herzigova is shown with the caption 'Hello boys', suggesting that men cannot keep their eyes off a woman showing off her assets. In the 'Hello girls!' advertisement shown in Figure 24.4 it is implied that women cannot keep their eyes off a man showing off his assets. By placing the man in such an ostentatiously objectified position, albeit with the possibility of a tongue-in-cheek reading, they are using an updated version of the visual repertoire available for the depiction of men.

In these examples we see that even when men are turning themselves into objects to be desired by others, they are given a chance to be in control. We see here a tension between men being insecure and the conventional way of portraying masculinity as a dominant force.

Conclusion: the consuming body in contemporary consumer culture

In this chapter, we have given you a backdrop to the 'brave new world' of more or less conventional representations of femininity and masculinity in advertising. The body, previously represented in a very restrictive and gender-stereotyped way, has now been set free, and this has opened up an arena of carnivalesque humour and previously unimaginable possibilities. Advertisers can engage in a free-for-all bodyfest where almost anything goes,

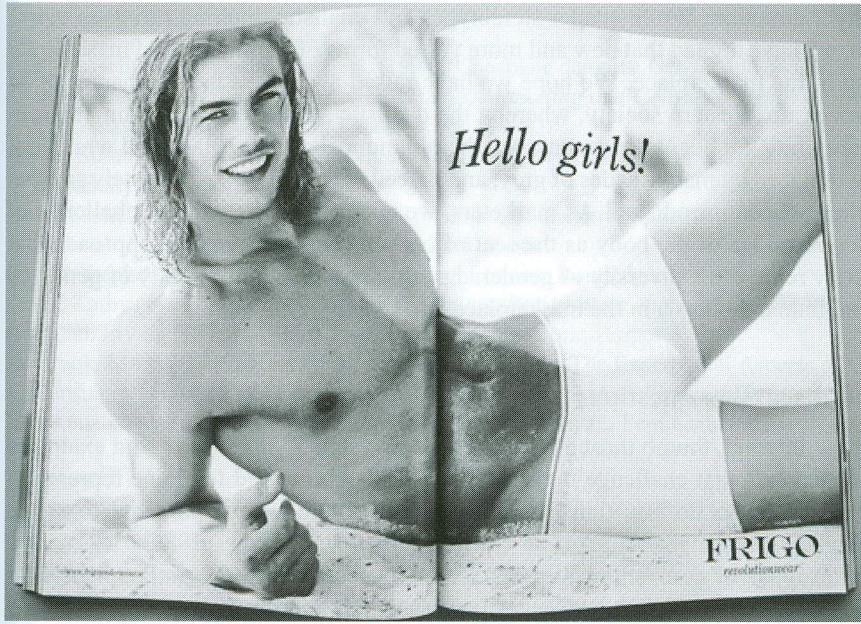


Figure 24.4 'Hello girls!' advertisement for Frigo Underwear.

Source: Photo credits: Stevens and Ostberg

and postmodern irony can cover a multitude of sins. The consuming body has become a powerful symbol of twenty-first-century consumer culture, and this concept offers advertising/marketing practitioners the opportunity to engage in tongue-in-cheek theatrics, audacious feats of dare-devilry, slapstick comedy and fantastic flights of fancy that amuse, provoke, move and at times shock their intended target audience(s) as well as those who are not their intended target audience(s)!

One of the issues we have addressed in this chapter is that by turning to the body and postmodernism, we are in danger of being purveyors of the same old stereotypes and indeed the same old taboos about the body, and the gender issues that surround it. No amount of humour or tongue-in-cheek irony can obscure that. We need to be aware of the power issues that lie at the core of dichotomous thinking about gender. While we have demonstrated that change is happening in terms of how the masculine body is represented in current advertising campaigns, and in terms of how women's bodies are represented, we have also shown that these discursive practices may often reproduce long-standing tendencies in marketing strategy to trade in and on the (gendered) body insecurities of consumers.

This chapter suggests that by adopting a more critical and culturally aware approach to the study of advertising, we can better understand where dichotomous thinking originated, how it has evolved over time, and how it currently is manifested in contemporary advertising practices. Furthermore, we argue that a greater awareness of these issues makes for a more nuanced and socially responsible marketing management approach. We have also tried to show that increasingly male and female bodies are represented in advertising as complex, living bodies acting in the marketplace and engaging and interacting with it, rather than stereotypical, gendered objects that are easily manipulated by marketers. This is of course a

step in the right direction. While gender stereotypes and dualistic thinking run deep in our society, then, we have argued that new and more varied forms of femininity and masculinity are emerging in the marketplace. We hope we have raised awareness in this chapter of an emerging process in Western society, whereby the dualistic structures surrounding masculinity and femininity are beginning to unravel, the old monochromatic black and white lens is now being replaced by many shades of grey, and indeed we might more accurately say that colour has finally been introduced! As marketers, we now need to rise to the challenge of turning the current idea of the body as the seat of consumer identity into an approach that more accurately reflects the diversity of gendered positions and the multiplicity of gendered identities (and human bodies!) in the marketplace.

Review and discussion questions

- 1 Browse the internet, thumb through a magazine, or watch TV and try to find examples of advertisements that challenge the status quo of masculine and feminine representations. In what ways do you think these advertisements have the potential to create positive change in society?
- 2 Are certain types of companies more likely to be successful in the marketplace with non-traditional representations of masculinity and femininity? If so, what are these types of companies and why do you believe that they are more suited?
- 3 Humour is a very effective means of gaining consumers' attentions and increasing the likeability of a brand. It also enables advertisers to get away with 'political incorrectness', for example, and push the boundaries of good taste. Do you think the end justifies the means? What moral and ethical issues do such strategies raise?

Exercise

While it might be far from a simple and straightforward process to move from a complacent to a subversive strategy regarding the use of gendered representations in advertising, we would like to invite present and future managers to address these issues and to make a conscious choice, rather than just opting for the easy way out, which would typically be the *laissez-faire* position. In order to think more consciously about these issues, here are some questions that one might pose to one's own company:

- 1 In what ways are we presently portraying women and men – as well as femininity and masculinity – in our marketing communication campaigns?
- 2 Are we, by portraying women and men in this way, contributing to cementing stereotypes or are we creating positive change?
- 3 Are there other possible ways, in which we could portray, or address, women and men in our marketing communication campaigns?
- 4 What would be the possible effects of portraying or addressing women and men in these alternative ways?

Keywords

advertising, body representation, femininity, gender, masculinity

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